Activation of Campbelltown’s public spaces using public art

Public art at Campbelltown has been used to lift and invigorate run-down parts of the city centre. The City Council has commissioned murals to brighten otherwise dull streets and laneways.

The city has effectively adopted the definition of public art from the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. This position states that public art is ‘an artwork in any medium, planned and executed outside a gallery context and intended specifically for exhibition within public space.’

Campbelltown’s public art is being used to counter an image problem that dates back to the 1970s. The city’s once vibrant retail heart of Queen Street never fully recovered from the competition of shopping malls in the 1980s, the demise of the Macarthur Growth Centre and issues around welfare housing.

Public art installations have demonstrated the vibrancy of the city’s culture and a site where there is potential ‘to push the boundaries with new ideas and fresh thinking’.

The activation of public spaces in the city centre has been assisted by the opening of the Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2005. The gallery has forged a dynamic environment for the local art scene through contemporary artworks and exhibitions, and public art is one part of that program.

The Campbelltown Arts Centre sponsors public art in cooperation with Campbelltown City Council. This collaboration has resulted in the commissioning of several interesting murals that tell ‘the stories of the city’s diversity, resilience and connection’. The Arts Centre has done this by extending its artworks ‘beyond the walls of the [gallery] into the streetscapes of our Central Business District’ as part of ‘Reimagining Campbelltown’.

‘Reimagining Campbelltown’ is a staged plan to rejuvenate the Campbelltown CBD, and one part is the revitalisation of the Queen Street precinct. The program has several place-specific objectives ‘required to support [the city] realise a sustainable, resilient and prosperous future.

An exciting example is Aboriginal-Chinese Jason Wing’s ‘Three Mobs’ mural depicting a fire snake. ‘The artwork features interwoven rainbow serpents, which celebrates the intersection of Campbelltown’s peoples and their many thriving cultures.’

Image supplied by author
Wing maintains that the snake is often demonised and misunderstood and treated as 'The Other', in much the same way that people from Campbelltown have been treated in the past. He maintains that the snake is celebrated in Indigenous and Chinese cultures and not feared, and his work is a metaphor as a symbol of community resilience, diversity and unity. Wing’s artwork takes inspiration from Indigenous culture, where the rainbow serpent is the creator ‘of all things on Earth’, and Chinese culture, where the serpent is a symbol ‘for luck and abundance’.

Wing’s art installation is a metaphor for the story of continuity and change in the Campbelltown community. The ‘Other’ confronts the community’s challenges and treats them as an opportunity to renew and reinvigorate the city.

One of the city’s least known and most vibrant public art spaces is provided by the Western Sydney University Sculpture Award and Exhibition held at the Campbelltown campus Sculpture Park set around the lakes. A landscape of public art that challenges the senses and provokes the imagination.

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